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ABSTRACT

This paper suggests a sequence of requisite skills for the identification of main ideas including identifying the key words or topic of a sentence, identifying the key words or topic of a paragraph, identifying the topic sentence of a paragraph, recognizing an explicitly stated main idea of a paragraph, recalling an explicitly stated main idea, inferring the main idea of a paragraph not explicitly stated, recognizing the relationships among main ideas in related paragraphs of longer selections, and inferring an overall thesis statement or main idea of longer selections. A logical step-by-step procedure for teaching the main idea is outlined for elementary teachers, including teaching main idea skills and teaching main ideas of paragraphs. The four step procedure includes writing a brief statement identifying what each sentence says, identifying the one idea that all of the sentences discuss, writing the main idea in a complete sentence, and locating the sentence that states the main idea. Once the procedure has been mastered, the four steps can be applied equally to sentences, paragraphs, and longer selections.

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A SYSTEMATIC PROCEDURE FOR TEACHING

MAIN IDEA

Abstract

The ability to comprehend the main idea of a paragraph or longer selection is perhaps the most fundamental of all the comprehension skills; yet, this important reading/study skill often proves extremely difficult for elementary school youngsters. Unfortunately, teachers at the junior high, senior high, and even college levels assume that their students possess this important skill when, in fact, many do not.

In this article, the authors provide the elementary teacher with a logical step-by-step procedure for teaching the main idea. Examples are provided for use of the teaching strategy at the sentence and at the paragraph levels. The same basic questions are asked when teaching students to locate the main idea of a longer selection.

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A SYSTEMATIC PROCEDURE FOR TEACHING MAIN IDEA

It has been stated by some reading authorities that perhaps the most fundamental of all the comprehension skills is that of identifying the main idea. Harris and Sipay (1971) stated that without that ability, the "reader gets lost in a mass of detail, inspecting trees but unable to see the forest" (p. 307). Dechant (1970) said all other skills are secondary to main idea skills.

The value of being able to identify the main idea successfully cannot be overemphasized as it is prerequisite to many other kinds of reading/study skills. For example, a reader will not be able to infer an author's purpose unless he understands the message the author is trying to convey. In fact, the reader will not be able to deal with higher levels of comprehension until he has mastered what the author says (Herber, 1970). Additionally, identifying patterns of organization, summarizing, outlining and other types of reading/study skills become meaningless rituals without prior mastery of main idea skills.

Yet, if the identification of main ideas are so fundamental and of such value, why are so many children, regardless of grade level or subject, unable to do so? Many teachers have had experiences in the classroom where their students have been unable to get from their reading what they consider most important -- the main ideas. Additionally, they are stymied as to what to do to remedy the situation. Our present instructional materials and practices do not seem to lend themselves to this task.

Jolly (1974) suggested that problems associated with identifying the main idea are due to the following reasons:

1. Skills prerequisite to the effective mastery of main ideas are not often included in reading textbooks, or courses of study. When they are included, they are rarely taught in sequence.
2. Identification of main ideas and related skills are usually taught in workbook or composition exercises affecting little transfer to other reading needs.
3. Textbook exercises, which purport to teach main ideas, often simply test students' ability with the skill rather than teach the skill (p. 165).

We cannot make the assumption that workbook exercises and textbook definitions are sufficient to aid a reader in identifying the main idea. They do little teaching. What is required is a procedure, or strategy, to aid teachers in helping their students to identify main ideas. Such a procedure must be systematic enough so as to enable the students to transfer it to all reading tasks. It is the purpose of this article to provide just such a procedure.

Sequence of Main Idea Skills

By modifying Jolly's (1974) sequence of main idea skills to reflect ideas within Barrett's (1972) hierarchy of comprehension, we are able to produce a more specific breakdown of main idea skills. The following is a suggested sequence of requisite skills for the

Identification of main ideas:

1. Identifying the key words or topic of a sentence.
2. Identifying the key words or topic of a paragraph.
3. Identifying the topic sentence of a paragraph.
4. Recognizing an explicitly stated main idea of a paragraph.
5. Recalling an explicitly stated main idea.
6. Inferring the main idea of a paragraph not explicitly stated.
7. Recognizing the relationships among main ideas in related paragraphs of longer selections.
8. Inferring an overall thesis statement or main ideas of longer selections.

Although the first few skills in this sequence may seem relatively simple, teachers should not make the assumption that students have already mastered them. Herber (1970) cautioned that assumptive teaching does not produce independent learners. Rather, it is best to assume students have not mastered these skills so as to avoid any possible consequences that may result from inaccurate assumptions.

Besides providing a framework from which to teach main idea skills, a teacher can also use this sequence to devise a quick informal diagnostic measure to ascertain how well a student can handle main idea skills. All that is needed are a few sample paragraphs in which the student is asked to find topic sentences, main ideas, and topics. In this way the teacher can ascertain which step in the sequence the student needs additional reinforcement in main idea skills.

It should also be pointed out that, in this sequence, main idea skills on the literal level are to be mastered before the student should be asked to deal with main idea skills on the inference level. Herber (1970) and Smith (1963) both pointed out that students must master what the author says (literal level) before he can determine what the author means (inferential level).

Teaching Main Idea Skills

When teaching main idea skills, as when teaching other reading skills, it is best to begin with materials at the student's instructional level. Materials at a student's frustration level will be too difficult for him to handle and will make the skills lesson meaningless. It is suggested that in order to insure that a student understands the concept of main idea, that easy materials, close to a student's independent level, be used to create a success experience. Once the student has "walked through" the concept and has an understanding of main idea skills, then instructional materials can be increased gradually in difficulty.

Since the sequence of main idea skills proceeds from the simplest to the most difficult task, and since it is not best to assume that students have mastered the simplest task, an example of identifying the main idea at the sentence level is provided. To illustrate sentence comprehension the following example will be used:

"The goal of our present administration is to
straighten out the economy."

In sentence comprehension, the first thing we should teach students to do is to ask the question, "What is this sentence about?"

In this way we are getting the students to identify the key words, or topic, of the sentence -- the first step in our sequence of main idea skills. The question should reveal the following answer,

"The goal of the present administration."

Next, we would teach the students to ask the following question, "What does the author say about the topic?", or specifically for the sample sentence, "What does the author say about the goal of the present administration?" Supplying the answer to this question will enable the student to grasp the main idea of the sentence. The question should reveal the following answer,

"That they want to straighten out the economy."

That answer is the main idea of this sample sentence.

Identifying the main idea at the sentence level is one of the simplest main idea tasks for the student. If based upon an informal diagnosis of a student's main idea skills, a student needs reinforcement of main idea skills at the sentence level, then that is where instruction should begin. Obviously, one example of getting the main idea at the sentence level probably would not be enough reinforcement to insure that the student has command of that skill. Repeated practice will be necessary. Before students can deal with main ideas skills at the paragraph level, mastery at the sentence level is essential.

In order to deal with paragraph comprehension, it is necessary to conceive of a paragraph as a series of sentences developed around a central idea. Since we are dealing with literal level comprehension,

and, therefore, explicitly stated main ideas, we can conceive of the structure of most paragraphs in the following way:

Main Idea

Detail 1

Detail 2

Detail 3

•
•
•
•
•

As stated earlier, to identify the main idea, we should teach the students to ask the question, "What does the author say?" To provide a better frame of reference for paragraph structure, we can teach students to ask the question, "Why is what the author says so?" Supporting details will supply that answer and give students a basic idea of how most paragraphs are structured.

Steps in Teaching Main Ideas of Paragraphs

Once a student is familiar with paragraph structure, we can begin to teach him a procedure to identify the main idea of a paragraph. Teaching students to identify main ideas of paragraphs is not simply just a matter of giving them more and more paragraphs to practice on, and simply saying, "What is the main idea?" Rather, students should be provided a strategy, or a systematic procedure for getting the main idea which they can use for all reading tasks.

After directing the students to read the paragraph carefully for the purpose of discovering the main idea, the teacher is ready to lead the students through the following four-step strategy:

Step One. *Write a brief statement identifying what each sentence says.* Students should identify briefly what the main idea of each sentence is. Before dealing with main idea skills on the paragraph level, students should have already been through the process on the sentence level. It is at this point that they apply that skill. Writing is suggested at least in the initial stages of instruction in order to insure that each student is involved actively in the learning process.

Step Two. *Identify the one idea that all of the sentences discuss.* It is here that we are trying to get students to center their attention on the main idea. Essentially, in this step the students are identifying the *topic* of the paragraph. Again, we ask each student to write down the paragraph topic.

Step Three. *Write the main idea in a complete sentence.* Even though the students have identified the topic of each sentence, it is best for the students to state in their own words what they think the main idea is. Basically, they can ask themselves, "Considering the topic of the paragraph (identified in Step Two), what do all of the sentences add up to?" In this way, students are learning to formulate main ideas, and that will help them when they deal with paragraphs that have main ideas not explicitly stated.

Step Four. *Locate the sentence that states the main idea.* In this step students are asked to identify the sentence in the paragraph which most closely approximates the main idea they stated (Step Three). The matchup between steps three and four provides students with a self-check on what exactly is the main idea.

Once students appear to have mastered the four-step procedure using paragraphs with explicitly stated main ideas, then they are ready to use the same procedure with paragraphs containing implied main ideas. The only difference in the procedure occurs in Step Four when the students are asked to match their stated main idea (Step Three) with the sentence in the paragraph that appears to state the main thought (Step Four). Obviously, there will be no such match-up at the implied level; therefore, a fifth step is suggested to assist the student in verifying his response in Step Three. The students may now be asked, "How do all of the sentences within the paragraph support or explain your stated main idea?" This step provides the students with additional reinforcement of how a paragraph is structured by making him examine how each sentence relates to the main idea. In essence, this step becomes a self-check or confirmation for the student in selecting the main idea.

To examine how this systematic procedure would work with an actual paragraph, let us "walk through" a paragraph as we would if we were working with students. The following is the sample paragraph we will examine:

"Andrew Jackson moved to Nashville, Tennessee, where he established a successful law practice. He owned a fine mansion, a hundred slaves, a stable of race horses, and a general store. He bought land for as little as ten cents per acre and sold it for three dollars. Things went well for young Andrew Jackson."

After reading the paragraph, the students are ready to think about what each sentence is saying (Step One). They are trying to identify the main idea of each sentence. To accomplish this, the students should write down briefly what each sentence says. Later they can be asked simply to verbalize to themselves, a peer, or to the teacher. In doing so, the students will answer something like this:

Sentence 1: Jackson moved to Nashville and established a successful law practice.

Sentence 2: He owned a mansion, slaves, horses, and a store.

Sentence 3: He bought land.

Sentence 4: Things went well for Jackson.

This gives the students an idea of what each sentence is about. Next, the students should try to key on the main idea by asking what one idea all the sentences are talking about (Step Two). With this paragraph, the students might answer:

"Jackson's success"

This statement is the topic of the paragraph.

Now that the topic of the paragraph has been identified, the students can state in their own words what they think all the sentences add up to. In this way, they can state what they believe is the main idea (Step Three). Students might answer like this:

"Andrew Jackson was a very successful person."

In Step Four we ask the students to locate the sentence in the paragraph that best states the main idea as they have conceived it.

If there is a matchup, then the students have verified their choice as to exactly what is the main idea. In this sample paragraph, the students would choose sentence four, "Things went well for young Andrew Jackson."

Summary

As stated previously, students would have to be "walked through" this procedure a number of times with selections of gradually increasing difficulty before we could expect them to master the skill. However, once mastered, the student has the necessary structure by which he can begin to become an independent learner. For those individuals who seem to have great difficulty with this procedure, or with main idea skills, in general, additional specific exercises are suggested by Jolly (1974), Harris (1970), Dallmann et al (1974), and Duffy and Sherman (1972).

In conclusion, the four step teaching procedure described can provide students with a system to identify main ideas. Working with students in using this procedure will provide them with one of the skills that they will need to succeed with materials at higher grade levels.

Once this procedure has been mastered, the four steps can very easily become only two steps which can be equally applicable to sentences, paragraphs, and longer selections. The first step, after reading the selection, would be to ask, "What is it about?" This reveals the *topic* of the selection. Secondly, one should ask, "What does the author say about the topic?" Asking this question results in what we have been after -- that most valuable of reading skills -- the *main idea*!

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